

# Annie Machon: my so-called life as a spy

The murder of MI6 operative Gareth Williams last week has turned the spotlight on the shady world of espionage. Here, a former intelligence officer for MI5 explains why the life of a British spy is an insular one

By Annie Machon

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Spies have always loved living in Pimlico: a civilised area in central London, handy for strolling to the office, and wonderfully convenient for that midnight dash to work if your operation suddenly goes live. Plus, the local pubs are pretty good for the customary after-work moan.

I lived there myself when I worked as an intelligence officer for MI5 in the 1990s, so the murder of Gareth Williams in a nearby street gave me a bit of a jolt. While his death remains shrouded in mystery, what has been reported of his life sounds like classic GCHQ.



Annie Machon, former intelligence officer for MI5: 'I couldn't talk to my friends freely about my life, so they felt increasingly shut out' Photo: BRIAN SMITH

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There are distinct cultures within each of the three major UK spy agencies: MI5, the UK domestic security service; MI6, the overseas intelligence organisation; and GCHQ, the Government Communications HQ.

MI6 officers, as people who may have to work independently and undercover abroad, tend to be confident, individualistic and "ethically flexible", while MI5 officers need to co-ordinate a broad range of resources and people to run an operation, which requires greater team-building. Of the three agencies, GCHQ remains the most secretive and inward-looking, and is staffed predominantly with "boffin" types. Williams, with his mathematical skills and loner tendencies, would be a typical employee.

Despite the intelligence community presenting a united front to the outside world, culture clashes between the three agencies are commonplace. Staff on secondment between agencies – as Williams was, from GCHQ to MI6 – can have a rough time fitting into a new environment, working with colleagues who eye them with suspicion, as the divisions jockey for power, prestige and resources within Whitehall.

So what is life like working as a spy? The world of intelligence is not so much isolating as insulating. Even as you proceed through the convoluted recruitment process, you find yourself entering a parallel universe, one that exists alongside your everyday life.

From that first, exploratory meeting with an intelligence officer in an unmarked building in central London, you have to withdraw a little from your old existence. You are asked not to tell your family and friends, and immediately have to sign a notification of the rigorous terms of the Official Secrets Act, whereby if you talk about your work, you risk imprisonment.

The process of induction into this world is intriguing, flattering and seductive. The agencies tend to avoid the James Bond wannabes, and those inspired by the fake glamour of *Spooks*. The key motivation is generally wanting to do a job that can make a difference, protect the country and potentially save lives. The secret element adds spice and perhaps compensates for the anorexic pay. When I started working for MI5 in 1991, at the fast-track graduate level, the starting salary was £14,500 pa – a good £5,000 less than my peer group from Cambridge earned in their blue-chip jobs. The pay has improved somewhat since then, but you don't become a spy for the money.

The vetting process is protracted. For MI5, MI6 and GCHQ, officers are required to have the highest clearance – Developed Vetting. This begins with a home visit. Disconcertingly, I soon found myself in the family sitting room being grilled about my sex life by a little, grey-haired lady who looked just like a favourite grandmother, until you looked into her eyes.

Then the process widens. I had to nominate four friends who were willing to be interviewed about me, and they were asked to suggest yet more people... so secrecy becomes impossible. One friend, of a Left-wing hue, disapproved of my recruitment; even those who were supportive were reluctant to ask me too much. As I couldn't talk to them freely about my life, they felt increasingly shut out, so I lost old friends along the way.

Unsurprisingly, new officers begin to socialise increasingly with their colleagues, and close friendships grow rapidly. Within this clique, we could talk shop at dinner parties, use the same slang and terminology, discuss our work, and whinge about our bosses. With outsiders, we could never be fully ourselves. This, inevitably, often led to more than friendships. What might otherwise be called office romances flourished. I met my former partner, David Shayler, when we were both in our first posting in MI5.

Such relationships were not exactly encouraged, but were generally seen as a good thing by management – unless, of course, it was a clandestine matter that could leave the officer vulnerable to blackmail. Such affairs were seen as vetting offences.

Among spies, an old double standard held firm. There was one couple who were caught in flagrante in the office, not once but twice. The male officer was put on "gardening leave" for six months; the woman was sacked.

For the first few weeks in the job, the feeling of unreality and dislocation is strong. The only solid information you have about your new position, as you walk into the office for the first time, is the grade at which you will be working – nothing else.

My first posting was to the small counter-subversion section, F2. Even though it was a desk job, the information I was dealing with came from sensitive sources: intercepted communications, reports from agents who had penetrated target groups, police reports. And yet, within a few weeks, the handling of such secret and intrusive information became entirely normal.

Investigations can be very fast-paced, particularly in the counter-terrorism sections. Generally, officers work regular hours but occasionally, if an operation goes live, you work around the clock. If it proves a success, there might be a news item on the television about it – but obviously without the full back story. That can be a surreal experience. You feel pride that you've achieved what you signed up to do, but you cannot discuss it with anybody outside the office. At such moments, the disconnect from mainstream life is intensely sharp.

However, when something goes wrong – a bomb goes off in which civilians die – the feelings are even more intense. Guilt, anger, frustration, and a scramble to ensure that the blame doesn't attach to your section. The official motto of MI5 is *Regnum Defende* – defence of the realm. Staff mordantly used to joke that it should more accurately be *Rectum Defende*.

Personal security also ensures that there is a constant barrier between you and the normal world. If you meet someone interesting at a party, you cannot say too much about what you do, and such reticence can appear unfriendly. The cover story that MI5 officers use is that they work as civil servants at the Ministry of Defence; for MI6, it is the Foreign Office. This usually stops people from asking too much more, either through discretion or, frankly, boredom. Once or twice, people pushed me for more information, and my paranoia antennae immediately began to twitch: why are they so interested? Are they spies or, God forbid, journalists?

I had the misfortune once of using this cover story at a party, only to find my interlocutor actually worked for the real Ministry of Defence, and wanted to know which section I worked in, who my colleagues were, how long I had been there... Thankfully, the magic word "Box" – slang used to describe MI5 within Whitehall, derived from the organisation's old PO Box 500 number – brought that line of conversation to an abrupt halt.

As an intelligence officer, you quickly learn to be discreet on the telephone and in emails. Oblique conversations become the norm, and this bleeds into your personal life, too, much to the frustration of friends and family.

The internet is another challenge. As a "spook", the last thing you want to see is your photograph on a friend's Facebook page. Or, even worse, holiday snaps showing you in your Speedos, as the current head of MI6, Sir John Sawyer, found to his cost last year.

And now when you get to leave the intelligence service, as I did after five years, can you ever really have a normal life afterwards, and shake off the mindset?

Many of my former colleagues have left and built careers in a wide variety of areas. But I wonder how many still look automatically over their shoulders as they put their key in the front door; how many tear up paper before throwing it in the bin; and how many are reflexively reticent about their personal life?

Would I want to be a spy these days? No, thank you. I'm happier in the real world.

\* **Annie Machon** is the author of *Spies, Lies and Whistleblowers* (<http://books.telegraph.co.uk/BerteShopWeb/search.do>) (Book Guild)

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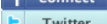
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Today 01:44 PM

but is her book funny, like Spycatcher.

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"...immediately have to sign a notification of the rigorous terms of the Official Secrets Act, whereby if you talk about your work, you risk imprisonment. "

and yet here you are doing so!

*Annie Machon is the author of Spies, Lies and Whistleblowers (Book Guild) "*

Hopefully the book has been vetted by at least one competent spook, and therefore contains nothing of interest for anyone looking for juicy tidbits.

If there is one message here, it would seem to me that seconding GCHQ types to MI6 has a lot of risks regarding the mixing of personality types.

A gentleman named Henry Kolm passed recently. He was responsible for smuggling German rocket scientists into the US after WW2 under the noses of the US Immigration Department, who at that time actually enforced laws relating to illegal migrants. Mr. Kolm declined to discuss his activities almost until his dying day. Perhaps there is a useful lesson here for spy agencies and their employees, ex- or otherwise?

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wrq (<http://my.telegraph.co.uk/members/wrq>)

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Interesting article - interesting comments, too. Could I just ask those commenting directly on Gareth Williams' case to remember that he remains the cherished son of a family? I'm not sure how respectful ill-informed comment on his mental health are but I'm pretty certain that they are deeply hurtful. A bit of old fashioned tact required, perhaps?

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busmanj (<http://my.telegraph.co.uk/members/busmanj>)

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Sounds like a great job, living in Pimlico and doing all that.

And, most professionals find their career insular, even incestuous, and themselves isolated for one reason or another - having to up sticks and move half way round the world regularly in my case means I have no permanent friends outside work. Doesn't worry the rest of us.

That stuff was good about the "... Official Secrets Act, whereby if you talk about your work, you risk imprisonment...".

I'll come and visit. We can chat about the Box.

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xerxesqarquebus (<http://my.telegraph.co.uk/members/xerxesqarquebus>)

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"... Within this clique we could talk shop at dinner parties..."

Knowledge of the GCHQ rules led me to be surprised by this.

"... the information I was dealing with came from sensitive sources..."

This is why GCHQ has such rules.

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Chippychap

Today 07:07 AM

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He is a good advert for not picking women.

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22Igonikon2

Today 06:25 AM

Annie Machon's life as a spy is an intriguing one. What tasked

my imagination was how many reasons she has to give to guys in refusing their requests for social engagements. Because,

it seems under the stringent spy rules, it seems, the only guy she can safely and comfortably date would a fellow certified British

spy. This must be difficult for an attractive lady like her. She shared tit bits showing spies are fellow humans with passionate, animal-romantic sensibilities. I like that. Igonikon Jack, USA

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trip\_hazard

Yesterday 11:27 PM

How can you initiate an oblique conversation with a barista and still get the full department order right from Starbucks?

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GT (<http://www.marketmentat.com>)

Today 12:15 AM

Very simply; the barista talks to other baristas... and is not busily defending their 'turf'.

Above GS9 at Langley (3 years in, roughly), people have their eyes so firmly fixed on their next promotion - or landing a job at State - that they spend half their workday triangulating and building little empires. The other half is spent trying to humiliate the GS5s (there is no tyrant more petty than a minor bureaucrat).

In the same way: if you want to conduct a whisper campaign within a major law firm, you don't need the e-mail addresses of the partners - you need the e-mail addresses of five secretaries. That ensures that 15 senior associates and 35 associates hear about it - if the partners are informed, they keep it amongst themselves. (Note - some partners have all their e-mail read and printed out by their secretaries - the 'bring it to me on a salver' types... but they're rare nowadays).

Senior staff are always involved in a game of mutually-assured embarrassment: they 'have the goods' on each other, and so will not betray one another for risk of being caught in the blowback. Mid-level guys will use intel on their superiors to 'trade' with - to curry favour with, or to dethrone, their boss.

JUNIORS, on the other hand... they're where the meat is. They have not been in long enough to be 'in the game' and none weeks out of ten they have been the victim of some slight from above.

Cheerio

GT

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GT (<http://www.marketmentat.com>)

Yesterday 10:52 PM

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It's good to finally see someone from the 'intelligence community' giving the lie to the stupid notion that MI5 (and CIA, ASIO, and police intelligence) analysts are all polymath Jedi Ninja Navy-SEALs who live in tastefully decorated lofts and drive Maseratis.

One of the (many) things about which Joe Public is kept unaware, is the extent to which the government's eyes are - at bottom - staffed by relative underachievers, many of whom spend their (short) careers seething with disgruntlement at being paid a pittance and treated like garbage. The hierarchy within such orgs is stultifying, primarily because anyone with half a brain realises within a month that they're NOT working on a 'good cause'... so the ones who stay and rise through the ranks are the careerists who don't give a rat's about the mission's morality (nor do they give a solitary toss about 'national security' or any other such falderol... at's all about the benjamins, and power).

So next time you wonder how on earth orgs like Wikileaks (where the core has been together for 25 years - since their days hacking NASA in the 1980s from a bedroom in Melbourne) can make the CIA look like a pack of morons... well, it's smart guys on a mission to change the world for the good, versus low-paid careerist bureaucrats on the clock.

I have known who wins this fight since 1987.

And the hagiography about the fella who got killed (who was now apparently a 'math genius' to rival Ramanujan): be aware that nobody on ANY side gets rid of cryptanalysts (who - contrary to silly shows like 'Rubicon' - are not busily extracting encryption protocols from disparate crossword puzzles).

There are only two motives for offing an intel hack: revenge (amongst wet workers), or source protection. This guy was not a source for the other side (or to be more accurate, for any of the other sides), so there was no incentive for the 'baddies' to off him.

So that leave two possibilities, Sherlock: either he was a wettie (in which case - if you're a trigger man for the Sopranos, what goes around - comes around)... or he was offed because he was in the throes of becoming a leak.

Cheerio

GT

(Edited by author 21 hours ago)

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englishmaninstockholm (<http://my.telegraph.co.uk/members/englishmaninstockholm>)

Today 08:26 AM

Agree with completely GT.

Many years ago, I started working for IBM. Arriving there, I thought (in my naivety) that I would be working with the creme de la creme in computing. Ha !!!

Like ANY job (be it a neurosurgeon or whatever) there are REALLY clever people, and then there are the people who only just scraped through their exams - but you never get wind of that. (My daughter got a first at University - by 0.5% - but her diploma simply says a first)

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johnbarretrose (<http://my.telegraph.co.uk/members/johnbarretrose>)

Today 04:40 AM

Underachievers top, middle and bottom, Yea.

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